

Silver Strong & Associates
Research Report



Thoughtful Classroom
Professional Learning Portfolios:
A Model for Strategic Planning
and Strategic Instruction

Prepared by
Linda Lippitt, Ph. D
Research Consultant

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Overview

The purpose of this paper is to summarize the process and results of a research project studying the effects of implementing Thoughtful Classroom Professional Learning Portfolios as tools for developing Professional Learning Communities and strategic instruction on a district-wide level.

Background

The study was done in Kentucky's Hardin County School District, a district of roughly 14,500 students with diverse populations and school settings, with one common vision: *Schools, parents, and community actively involved in "Helping Children Succeed."*

Integrating this theme of collaborative contributions into their professional development plans, administrators and teachers adopted Silver Strong & Associates' Thoughtful Classroom Professional Learning Portfolios to enhance Professional Learning Communities and develop district-wide strategic instruction.

The Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the effects of implementing Thoughtful Classroom Professional Learning Portfolios on a district-wide level. Two areas were examined: (1) establishing effective Professional Learning Communities to create an intensified learning environment, and (2) the effect of strategic instruction in every classroom on overall student achievement, especially in the area of reading.

Beginning in 2006, representatives from the 11 elementary schools, including principals, grade-level teachers, and specialists, worked with central office

administrators to initiate a process of systematic inquiry about the quality of teaching and learning in their schools.

Using Thoughtful Classroom Professional Learning Portfolios as a foundational tool, a core unit of teachers and administrators in each school became an Instructional Learning Team (ILT). The ILT's main purpose was to develop and sustain a meaningful culture of professional learning in every school. To help build the foundation needed to establish such a culture, each school received direct coaching, training, and technical support from Silver Strong & Associates trainers and coaches over the first three years of the initiative.

Replicating their training in portfolio-based Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), ILT members supported teachers in similar learning communities at each school. Critical to sustaining the momentum of the strategic teams were monthly meetings and extensive coaching—first from an outside coach, and then from internal team members and a county administrator.

The groups addressed what teachers cared about, beginning with the most pressing challenge: analysis of student work. These conversations led to a study of specific strategies from 2007-2010: *Word Works: Cracking Vocabulary's CODE, Compare & Contrast, Reading for Meaning, Inference, Questioning Styles and Strategies, and Task Rotation*. The portfolios focused team discussions around common practices which were explored systematically. Eventually, the work of these teams established a more rigorous approach to content across the schools that was sustained through strategies that immersed students in critical thinking, problem solving across learning styles, and options for assessment. This “strategic team” approach has led to continued positive growth in Hardin County's student reading achievement, both in classroom engagement and in standardized test scores—often by double digit growth across a grade level.

Establishing Effective Professional Learning Communities to Create an Intensified Learning Environment

Each school's strategic team working as a PLC represented what Dennis Sparks calls a new paradigm for staff development, mixing teacher learning experiences including informal joint planning of lessons, the critiquing of student work and the study of curriculum materials. “To be successful, staff development must focus on the content that teachers teach and the methods they use to teach that content, and it must be sufficiently sustained and linked to daily classroom practice to affect student learning” (Guskey, 2000, p. x). This intensified learning environment for teachers would become the model for how students would work in the classrooms.

An emphasis on instructional strategies and student work intentionally promoted the right kind of dialogue among instructional teams at each building. Director of Elementary Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment, Jimmie Dee Kelley, explains that

“Effectiveness and impact is driven by a key understanding that the Thoughtful Classroom Professional Learning Portfolios are not a program, they are a process. Progress is not accidental, but contains purposeful thought and intention running through every bit of work. What hit me the strongest was the ‘how-to’ thinking beyond changing the curriculum to strategic instruction that has students active and engaged in in-depth thinking which stimulates a natural desire to learn. Success is whether the student has learned it.”

If knowledge is socially constructed, then educators also learn more when they learn together (Von Frank, 2009). Rebuilding school culture around the teams’ insights about thinking and learning took time. The first year was devoted to understanding the Thoughtful Classroom portfolio process. Teachers used an inquiry process to move to a point of analysis of their own work and of the student work generated from their instruction. A first realization was the teachers were already utilizing many of the strategies of the portfolios; there was affirmation of initial strengths and that the extended strategies work hand in hand with standards.

With intensive coaching and support for PLCs, teachers embraced the tools and then gained comfort and confidence to explore new instructional decisions in their classrooms. Principal Jennifer Lewis of Lincoln Trail Elementary School says that teams began to “tweak” their existing classroom activities to get to more depth and rigor every year.

Jimmie Dee Kelley believes that the “aha” moment in the PLC process happened once the team process and targeted strategies were being used regularly. She observed that “Experiencing a strategy and reflecting on students’ interactions and performance layers the learning and brings teachers to the next level of professional practice.” Building-wide collaborations stemmed from the intensified learning happening in the smaller PLCs (which were based on grade level or other common factors). Teams found value in new perspectives, from sharing points of view within the team, and from actual observations of student work and class interactions. Silver Strong & Associates coach Joyce Jackson found that having a meaningful role in the PLC encouraged teachers to trust the portfolio process and make instructional decisions applicable to thoughtful practice. The goal was always to affect student growth, which became the work of the school community and was no longer the task of individual teachers in particular classrooms.

Sidebar: Professional Learning Communities – The Growth Process

Year One | 2006-2007

- Core Instructional Learning Team (ILT) received intensive training in Thoughtful Classroom Professional Learning Portfolios and the Silver Strong & Associates (SSA) model for Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), understanding diversity through learning styles, differentiated instruction, and targeted portfolio tools and strategies
- Building-based PLCs were established, led by each school’s ILT representatives; meeting schedule adapted by each school
- PLCs were supported by an SSA coach in collaboration, diagnostics, and reflective practice of selected portfolios for three training days at each school
- Strategy integration included collegial classroom observations, analyses of student work, and sharing of perspectives to understand the selected portfolio tools and strategies
- Coach worked closely with each principal to respond to needs of individual school community

Year Two | 2007-2008

- Schools focused on strategies and coaching
- Reflection centered on “doing” portfolios and understanding tools and strategies well enough to lead peers in the process
- Teachers moved beyond accepting the trainers’ intricate knowledge to the development of a personal synthesis of the strategic process to shape personal interpretations of tools and thoughtful activities

Year Three | 2008-2009

- One internal coaching day (facilitated by district staff) at each school
- Two external coaching days (facilitated by an SSA coach) at each school
- Focus on sustainability and maintenance
- New elementary school immediately brought into PLC process

Year Four | 2009-2010

- Principals work in a PLC to support administrator growth; three sets of four principals continuously planning and assessing
- District committed to sustaining the ILT internally
- District vision and leadership continued at each school with Fall and Spring coaching from central office administrator at each school
- Moved to intensified collegial leadership, a richer stage stimulated by insights about how members relate work and learning
- External consultant replaced by internal coaching led by central office
- Teachers strive for fidelity of strategy implementation and maximum effectiveness of tools
- Ongoing commitment to vision: *“Helping Children Succeed” through Strategic Teams and Strategic Instruction*, recognized danger in stopping too soon

Leading Strategic Instruction in Every Classroom with a Focus on Student Achievement

How do strategic teams use the inquiry process to look at their own work and to analyze where professional practice can change? Thomas Guskey noted that for an entire school to make changes that positively affect students, the ability of individual faculty members to develop skills in rigorous self-analysis focusing on student gains is a necessity. Less successful groups focus on logistical issues; more successful teams search for new ways to make improvements and take personal responsibility for learning outcomes (2000, p. 27).

For Hardin County, Jimmie Dee Kelley’s answer included getting to where “shift happens,” developing teacher-driven tools that establish student-centered learning. Kelley saw the strategies in the portfolios as tools to differentiate instruction and address a whole spectrum of learning. Teachers explored six ways to differentiate instruction and planned units around content, process, and product. They addressed student readiness, learning styles, and interests with strategies such as Task Rotation and questioning techniques that immersed kids in learning and provided for student choice and ownership. Jimmie Dee Kelley encouraged teachers to “see that students’ use of multiple learning approaches allowed them to process the content at a higher level of thinking; every student could be introduced to all levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy.” In her observations, she found that applying these expanded strategies was powerful for gifted and talented students and good for special needs students with additional venues for learning and assessing.

To initiate the discussions during Year One, the coach asked teachers to participate in a “Learning Sweep” to establish the instructional questions they wished to pursue. Each step of the “sweep” involved collaboration and analysis around the outcome of student achievement.

- Step 1* Teachers brought to the table three consecutive days’ worth of student work from the same group of students.

- Step 2* Teams examined the student work and identified the purposes of the assignments; the thinking skills demanded; the kinds of questions posed; and the learning styles addressed in the activities.

- Step 3* Teams identified common patterns and found that classroom questioning and activities too often focused on recall and failed to engage higher-order thinking. They then conducted action

research to identify ways to improve classroom questioning and increase the depth and complexity of student thinking.

Step 4 Teams then selected the best approaches for bringing research-based tools and strategies into the classroom to help raise the depth and complexity of questions and classroom activities across the district.

The PLCs worked as a problem-solving team. Meeting formally once a month during the school day or as a faculty development after school, the Thoughtful Classroom portfolio process helped teachers select strategies based on student work and to inquire as to how they would use new tools and practices. They planned, taught, observed, refined, and looked for the impact their implementation of strategies had on student performance. Teachers visited each other's classrooms and gave input about what was seen. Systematic applications of the portfolio process confirmed change and allowed teachers to develop their best answers as they incorporated tools and strategies into the classroom.

Administrators had their own learning teams and supported each other in building implementations. A liaison from the central office was at the coaching sessions and a commitment was made to train a district coach in addition to, and then instead of, an outside SSA coach. Principals examined data as a springboard to instructional decisions. They identified obstacles to the transformation of school culture and talked through possible solutions. In support of their teams, administrators decided to cover classes to free teachers to visit and observe each other's classrooms. Always, the goal was to contribute to shared success for teachers and students.

To sustain the advances over the four years, one key element was that team members had time to talk with each other to analyze their applications of the strategies. The coach facilitated meaningful conversations and alleviated any discomfort at looking so closely at student work. Together, they used the portfolio model to frame student learning around a floor plan for what students should know and understand. Kentucky standards were used in the development of these learning plans. The strategies and activities flowed from the expected outcomes for student performance and from identified student needs.

Sharing a principal's perspective, Jennifer Lewis recognized that the teacher is first. Honoring the art of the teacher is crucial to successful adaptation of a model. She suggested, "Start with teachers who will embrace the practices and let others see success. Speak with the parents about changes in instruction and increase expectations for more thoughtful student involvement in learning. Parents appreciate good teaching. Most importantly, use individual students to

measure progress, keep objectives rigorous, display essential questions, and keep students engaged and excited about learning to produce a powerful citizen.”

Sidebar: What Is the Thoughtful Classroom Portfolio Process?

Silver Strong & Associates’ Thoughtful Classroom Professional Learning Portfolios were designed in partnership with over 75 school districts whose teachers participated in Learning Clubs to collaboratively change their school culture and classroom practice. Moving forward to become a tool for the Professional Learning Community, the original portfolios have been revised to bring research-based instructional practices into every classroom. The new Strategic Teacher PLC Guides focus on one high-impact strategy from *The Strategic Teacher* and serve as a complete resource for a team of teachers to learn, plan, and implement the strategy in their classrooms.

Designed for flexibility, each Strategic Teacher PLC Guide develops the portfolio process through separate sections. Section 1 serves as an introductory tutorial to the strategy. Section 2 shows teachers how to plan and implement the strategy in their classroom. Teachers also work with a critical friend to provide reciprocal feedback on their lessons. Section 3 promotes teacher reflection on how lessons actually worked. Section 4 models a process for analyzing student work to improve instructional decisions.

Findings

Establishing Effective Professional Learning Communities to Create an Intensified Learning Environment

Building PLCs and formalized organizational learning were highlighted in Von Frank’s (2009) discussion of research on creating lasting changes in school culture. She presented elements linked to statistically significant improvements in student learning, such as:

- Collective identity with a common purpose
- Focus on learning with the end goal always student achievement
- All engaged in contributing to shared success

Hardin County’s application of Thoughtful Classroom Professional Learning Portfolios as a model for strategic planning and instruction exhibited all three of these research-based elements. Their approach to professional development was congruent with the ethic of collaborative contribution in the district vision statement: *Schools, parents, and community actively involved in “Helping Children Succeed.”*

Institutionalizing the collaborative values and thoughtful practices of PLCs and the Thoughtful Classroom portfolio process began with an administrative commitment to three years of training and coaching for a core ILT. From each elementary school, one person from each grade (K-5), the principal, the assistant principal, and one other staff member received intensive training in The Thoughtful Classroom Program, including diversity (learning styles) and portfolio strategies. In turn, they fostered a site-based PLC paced to meet each school's collective skills and needs. School schedules were modified to allow for formal monthly meetings and informal teacher follow-up. Regular walk-throughs of classrooms by teams, analysis of student work, and refining lesson plans demonstrate the growth of PLCs amid a focused use of new tools for collaboration, diagnostic discussion, and reflection. Formal review by central office and building administrators show that every one of the schools has teachers talking to each other and using regular grade level meetings for planning and reflection.

When asked, "What is my best answer to the instructional question posed from a 'Sweep' of classroom assignments?" teachers can point to:

- Strategy-based lessons planned in community
- Sharing of student work with colleagues on "Artifact Day"
- Poster sessions every six weeks to present ideas that work
- Continuous conversations that examine practice for effectiveness
- Breakfasts where colleagues pass along tools and strategies
- Day-to-day applications within the classroom

Through observations and data reviews, Jimmie Dee Kelley has found that fostering effective PLCs has meant making time for collegial conversations and reflective practice, changing the culture of each school with intensified learning for adults. Most importantly, teachers are also practicing and modeling thoughtful learning in their classrooms and expecting the same from their students.

Leading Strategic Instruction in Every Classroom with a Focus on Student Achievement

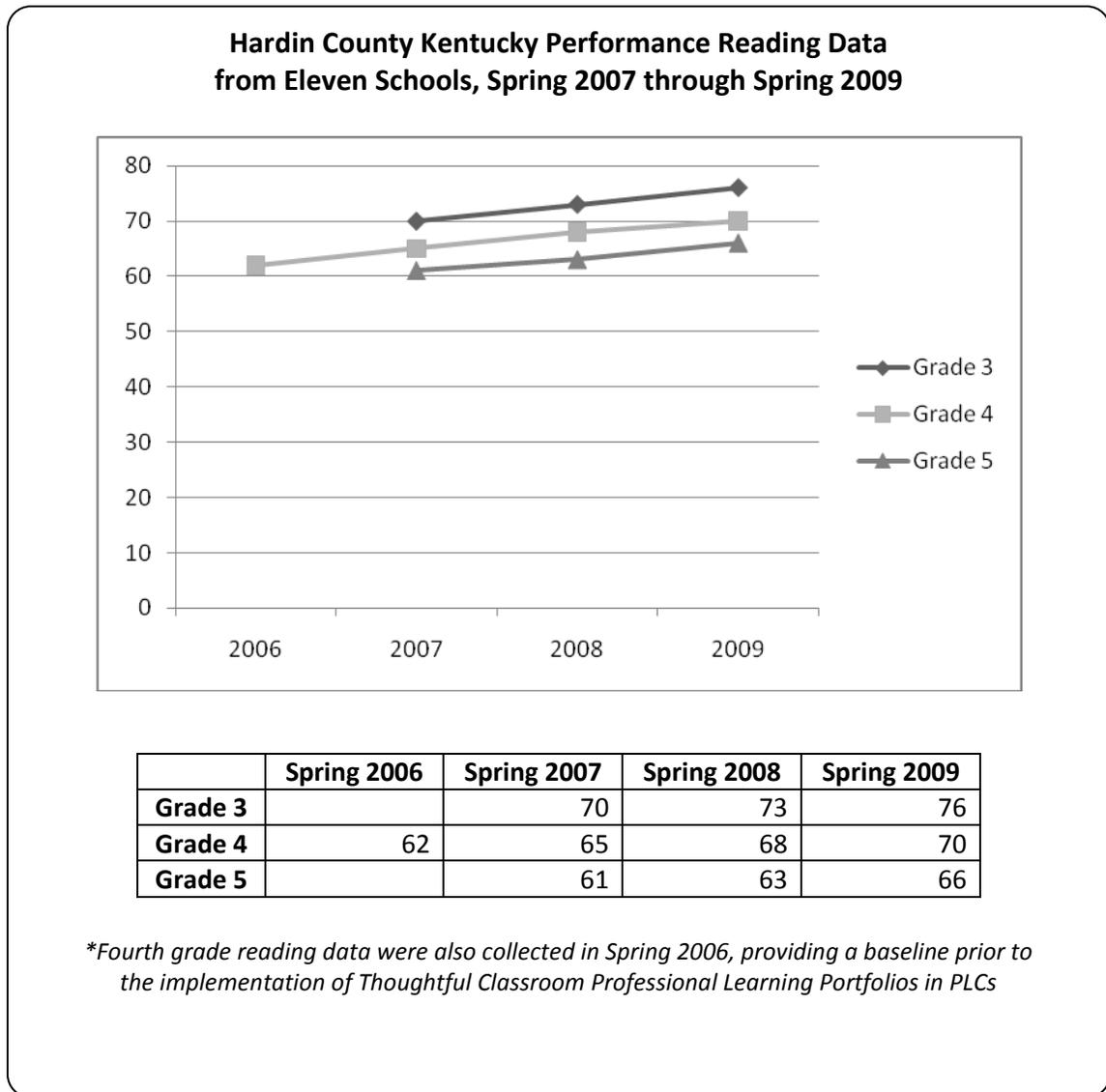
District leaders' expectations for the results of a strategic professional development model included looking at standards-based work with an eye toward test scores, but also toward the quality of student performance and thinking. This correlation of instruction to student achievement was not expected to happen in one year. As one administrator said, "moving from surface understanding to depth needs time to marinate."

Records of classroom observations over four years show distinct changes in instruction across the elementary classrooms. By Spring 2010, observations of elementary classrooms included:

- Instructional choices are more individualized
- Learning activities are purposeful and move across all four learning styles
- Teachers use questioning, not telling
- Portfolio steps are followed when applying strategies
- Student activities are designed to encourage students to arrive at understanding
- Expectations for a richer thinking process are evidenced in strategies such as Reading for Meaning and Compare & Contrast
- Greater use of graphic organizers
- Students taking over questioning

One principal emphasized how instruction has been set up for students to discuss and inquire in a learning environment. There is noticeably less teacher talk, more student talk, and more wait time. Administrative walk-throughs show a changing balance of teacher talk, moving to dialogue and discussion led by students. Initially the balance was 50% student/50% teacher, then 60/40, and now 70% student discussion and 30% teacher talk. Conversation has become a critical component of the engaged classroom where students talk to students about learning.

From lesson plans to classroom interactions, strategic instruction involving targeted learning goals was achieved through use of high-level thinking skills, instructional tools, and style-based activities. From the first year of the implementation, elementary reading scores showed a consistent gain for Hardin County as a whole. Figure 1 illustrates the steady rate of gain for grades 3, 4, and 5 in Kentucky Performance Reading Data, as measured by the percentage of students who achieved at the “proficient” or “distinguished” levels on the standards-based Kentucky Core Content Test. In Grade 3, the number of “proficient” and “distinguished” students rose from 70% to 76%; in grade 4 the number rose from 62% to 70%; and in grade 5 the number rose from 61% to 66%.

Figure 1: Kentucky Performance Reading Data, 2007 – 2009

An examination of test scores for the eleven schools participating in the professional development model for three years showed a range of growth. Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of performance change across the three grades in eleven schools.

Grade 4 had the largest observable gains, with 64% (7/11) of schools showing double-digit growth in reading achievement. These gains were across a four year span as the commonwealth had 2006 reading scores only for grade 4. The grade 4 performance was measured from a base line of achievement that had no strategic intervention, while grades 3 and 5 indicated growth following the first

year of intervention. Double-digit growth was demonstrated at 27% (3/11) of schools for grade 3 and at 45% (5/11) of schools for grade 5.

Jimmie Dee Kelley notes that the schools showing the highest rate of improvement shared several key attributes, including:

- Highly effective ILTs that were adept at transferring their knowledge to their school’s grade-level teams.
- A strong school culture that provides support to teachers and encourages the idea that “we’re all in this together.”
- Frequent grade-level team meetings in which teachers were able to openly and honestly discuss their classroom practices, share their successes and struggles, and connect their practice to its effects on student learning.

While it would be a mistake to assume that none of these attributes were in place in the schools showing negative gains, it is important to note that in all of the schools showing double-digit gains, ***all of these attributes were highly developed.***

Figure 2: Hardin County Kentucky Performance Reading Data, Grade Level Scores 2007 – 2009* Across Eleven Schools

Portfolios and Professional Learning Community	Performance Change: -1 – -12% pts	Performance Change: +1 – +9% pts	Performance Change: +10 – +19% pts	Percentage of Schools with Double-Digit Growth at Grade Level	Average Growth in Grade Level
Grade 3 (3 years)	2 schools	6 schools	3 schools	27%	+6 % pts
Grade 4 (4 years)	1 school	3 schools	7 schools	64%	+8 % pts
Grade 5 (3 years)	4 schools	2 schools	5 schools	45%	+5 % pts

**Fourth grade reading data were also collected in Spring 2006, providing a baseline prior to the implementation of Thoughtful Classroom Professional Learning Portfolios in PLCs*

Both anecdotal and observational records indicate that an intensified learning environment created for elementary teachers through PLCs and the Thoughtful Classroom portfolio process has created positive change in Hardin County classrooms. In general terms, teachers now view the expectations for student thinking and performance differently and plan more effectively for student achievement. Most schools have been successful in implementing research-based strategies that have made a difference in student learning.

Emphasis on literacy and thinking skills resulted in: 1) three years of continued growth across county reading scores, often in double-digit gains across grade levels; 2) an observably different school culture emphasizing a learning environment for both teachers and students; and 3) strengthened classroom inquiry and student-led discussion. Measured through classroom performance and standardized scores, students have responded successfully to this strategic instruction.

Conclusion

Overall, the use of Thoughtful Classroom Professional Learning Portfolios and Professional Learning Communities led to higher levels of student achievement in Hardin County, Kentucky. Educators in Hardin County successfully used the Thoughtful Classroom portfolio process to change school culture and practice with the goal of increasing student achievement. In one of their supporting texts, *The Strategic Teacher*, Harvey Silver reminded the teams to “Keep moving forward by regularly looking backward.” (Silver, Strong, & Perini, 2007, p. 17). The district has committed to this reflective prescription. Director Jimmie Dee Kelley concluded her commentary on the project with this

“Where do we go next? We continue to raise awareness of what we are doing and what we need to do. We will continue to grow a true and effective strategic model that meets the needs of our students. We will continue to create foundations for newcomers. Remember the saying, ‘good, better, best, never let it rest, until your good is better and your better is your best.’”

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